The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
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Lucille Dunlavy, Age 80+, Council Bluffs, Iowa
Mike Hicklin
407 Park Ave., Council Bluffs, IA 51503
8-4-2011

Mike Hicklin: Today we're interviewing Lucille Dunlavy; 407 Park Avenue, Council Bluffs, IA. We're doing this at Lucille's home. It's August 4, and approximately 1:45 p.m. My name is Mike Hicklin. This interview is part of the Iowa

Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Lucille, do I have your consent to record this interview?

Lucille Dunlavy: Yes.

Hicklin: Thank you. Would you like to tell us how you became blind? And, I guess, we'll start there.

Dunlavy: Well, that'd be a good place to start, I think. I lost the sight of one eye. I was born with normal vision, but at the age of three, I fell on glass and cut the one eye, which took the vision from it. And then at the age of six, sympathetic neuropathy set in in the other one, and I lost all the vision, except for light perception, which faded out over my teen years. And I've been totally blind since over 70-75 years, something like that now.

Hicklin: Did you then go to school at the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School in Vinton?

Dunlavy: No, I went to the Iowa School for the Blind. It was the Iowa School for the Blind at that time. Later on, after I graduated a few years, the name was changed to the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School. Yes, it was the same buildings, it was just a different name. I'm being technical, that's all.

Hicklin: Well, that's good. That I didn't realize.

Dunlavy: Oh, didn't you?

Hicklin: No.

Dunlavy: No, it was the Iowa School for the Blind. No, I went there from 1930 through 1942, when I graduated.

Hicklin: Do you have any specific memories about classes, or teachers, or events that happened that would be interesting for folks?

Dunlavy: I don't know as they'd be interesting. Naturally, I have a lot of memories, because I spent a lot of time there. I made a lot of friends, those of my contemporary age, as well as I was able to claim a few teachers as good friends, too. No, I got along fine there at school. I liked school, and I know that I had a lot more advantages and chances to do things than I would have in the public schools, here at that time. Of course, at that time, back in the '30s, things were a whole lot different than they are in public schools today. There wasn't all the support that the children get in the public schools today from the Department for the Blind and the other agencies. The world was different. Things changed there in the mid-'40s, but up until then, things...It was an entirely different world that we lived in.

Hicklin: Yes. Did the school for the blind offer any kind of training for something that would lend itself to a job?

Dunlavy: Not a whole lot. There were those who went on to college, and there were, well, there were two in my class that...Well, one, both of them, became Dictaphone operators, which was the forerunners of this is, what you're doing now. They recorded office things and then transcribed them into

letters and other such material. There were two of them in my class that did that during the school years. One did it for a few years, and the other one then went on to college. Our classes weren't too large. The class I was in we had 17, which was one of the larger classes. And, I had a chance at taking some music, which I had very little natural music in me. But, I enjoyed taking lessons, and I learned the technicalities, although I never became a great musician.

Hicklin: Did the school for the blind teach things like Braille and traveling with a cane, as well as the standards?

Dunlavy: Oh, they taught Braille, yes. At the time I was there, everyone learned Braille. And you did it from the very first day you were there, you started learning. No, we didn't have cane travel, excuse me. That came with the end of World War II. Cane travel just wasn't done anywhere to speak of, until the blinded veterans began coming back from World War II. And, it was through the military that the white cane travel projects were invented and devised and improved on. No, I was ahead of that.

Hicklin: Yeah, that sort of thing is so common place today that folks just take it for granted, so to speak.

Dunlavy: Yes, that's what I say. It was a different world back then.

Hicklin: Yeah.

Dunlavy: There just wasn't all the things there are today.

Hicklin: What did many of the folks do for jobs, back in those days?

Dunlavy: Well…

Hicklin: When they left school?

Dunlavy: There wasn't much doing for jobs during the '30s, because there weren't much doing for jobs for able-bodied people either.

Hicklin: Sure, with the stock market crash and all that.

Dunlavy: Yes, and the depression. And no, there just wasn't a great deal. When World War II started and the various defense plants began to open up, there was a lot of us got into that. I worked for Howard Manufacturing, here in Council Bluffs, for over two years. We made crystal holders for the Air Force and Signal Corps.

Hicklin: Is that part of their radio system or navigation system?

Dunlavy: It's part of the…their radios had crystals. They used crystals in them some way, don't ask me how they worked, because I don't know. It's too technical for me. But anyway, we made the holders and then they went someplace else, and they put the crystals in them, and then they went off to the military and they used them in the Air Force and the Signal Corps. We put out thousands and thousands of them every week.

Hicklin: And that was located right here in Council Bluffs.

Dunlavy: Right here in town, in Council Bluffs, down on Fourth Street most of the time; and a little later on, South Main, down on South Main.

Hicklin: Well, that's very interesting. After World War II, did jobs become a little bit more plentiful? Were you able to find other work, or were you a homemaker over the years, or?

Dunlavy: I was out of work for about four years after the peace came in August of 1945. And, then I got on at Skinner Macaroni in Omaha. That was through the help of Bob Moore, who was an employment person for the Department at that time. He helped get me in there, and I worked for them for almost 38 years. I was one of the lucky ones.

Hicklin: You had a good long career.

Dunlavy: I got a long job, uh-huh. It was factory work, but then that…I'm better with my hands than with typing and a few things like that. Some of them, there were my friends that went into transcription work and things like that. That's fine for them, but typing all day would have driven me wild.

Hicklin: So, when you worked for Skinner Macaroni, what was your job?

Dunlavy: Oh, I did different things. I worked on different lines. I started out on the line that packaged Italian-style spaghetti. There were 10 of us on the line, and some of the

girls weighed and wrapped the spaghetti in a piece of cellophane and passed it over to some more of us, and we folded the ends in and scotch-taped them down and through them on the line, and they went down and were packed for shipment. And, I worked on the hand-packed noodle line, and I worked on two versions of the lasagna line packaging, and, oh, I did different things over the years; packed twisted vermicelli on that line. I did line work.

Hicklin: Were you living in Council Bluffs, at the time?

Dunlavy: Yes, I lived here in Council Bluffs.

Hicklin: Did you have bus transportation back and forth, or?

Dunlavy: I took the city bus back and forth during the first few years I worked at Skinners, and then later they moved out west, where the bus transportation wasn't as convenient for me. And so, then I took the bus over to Omaha and met a co-worker and rode on out to the plant with her out west.

Hicklin: With all the cutbacks these days, the bus transportation is becoming more and more difficult for folks.

Dunlavy: It is more of a problem.

Hicklin: Yes.

Dunlavy: I retired in 1987; just short of 38 years, I put in over at Skinner's.

Hicklin: Are they still in business?

Dunlavy: No, they aren't. About the last 10 years I worked there. It had been originally a family owned business and, then about 10 years before I retired, Hershey Chocolate people bought Skinner's. They owned several other macaroni factories, for some reason. And then after I retired, a few years afterward, they sold it to some group in Omaha, and eventually, it was closed. The brand moved down to Kansas City, to a factory there. But the plant, itself, closed.

15:00

Hicklin: Are there things that you'd like to mention?

Dunlavy: Well, I had been a part of the Jennie Edmondson Hospital Volunteer Service. I joined that a couple months after I retired, and have been a part of it ever since and still am. I did some volunteer work in the hospital, the first two years, and I don't know, it seemed to me that when I found something I could fit into down at the hospital, it closed out. But anyway, after a few years, why they opened a day care center for children of their employees, and they were wanting volunteers, primarily as receptionists and a few other such things. And I signed up for that, and started working up there in 1993. And, shortly after that anything I had to do down at the hospital ran out, so instead of looking for something else, I just picked up a few more days up there, and I've been working up there ever since. I put in about 12 or 13 half days a month there.

Hicklin: Excellent.

Dunlavy: And, I still do. In fact, I was up there this morning.

Hicklin: It's good to be out and be active.

Dunlavy: Oh yes. And, there was, oh, probably from about 1990 up until, I think, it was in the fall of 2007 that I did some volunteer work for Radio Talking Book Services in Omaha, which is the equivalent of Iowa's IRIS Program. And, I volunteered over there for a good many years until I lost decent transportation. It got so I would have had to make about three different buses, and one change was in a not so desirable part of Omaha. That I just didn't particularly like. Plus, the fact I was getting older, and the trip out there was getting to be more and more of a problem on a bus. So, we parted company as friends.

Hicklin: Yes. Well, they provide a really good service. I remember being on their board in the early years, I suppose, it was the late '70s. And they were certainly a forerunner to the reading programs that Iowa has now.

Dunlavy: Oh yes.

Hicklin: And did an excellent job. They had some really good people there.

Dunlavy: They're way out west now.

Hicklin: Yeah. Have you used library service over the years?

Dunlavy: Oh good heavens, yes. I started…as soon as I graduated I started borrowing books. First, they came out of Illinois, and then later on out of Des Moines. I've used books. There's one over there on the couch open that I was reading while I was waiting for you. And, I also get them on tape. I have taped books and Braille books going all the time.

Hicklin: Excellent. Have you had a chance to see the new digital books?

Dunlavy: Yeah, I have a machine, and have had for several months.

Hicklin: Those are nice, too.

Dunlavy: Yeah, they are.

Hicklin: At least their sound quality is better than the cassettes, but.

Dunlavy: Well, the machines aren't quite as touchy as the old ones have gotten to be through just age.

Hicklin: Yes.

Dunlavy: They are quite temperamental.

Hicklin: Well, a lot of those are 30 to 40 years old.

Dunlavy: I know that.

Hicklin: Which is pretty old for an electronic thing.

Dunlavy: I know. I'm just glad they keep them going.

Hicklin: Yes.

Dunlavy: Even though they have to cannibalize some of them to keep others going.

Hicklin: We have a huge stockpile of them back in Des Moines that are saved for parts, because you can't really buy parts I understand anymore.

Dunlavy: That's what I understand.

Hicklin: So, we've saved a stockpile of old ones to keep for repairs to keep people going.

Dunlavy: Thank goodness for that. No, I do quite a bit of reading, and I do all kinds of reading. Oh granted, most of it is fiction, but I do some other…slip some nonfiction in every now and then, and all different kinds of reading; no one particular kind.

Hicklin: Let's see, have you been a part of any kind of advocacy groups?

Dunlavy: Yeah, I'm a member of the American Council of the Blind, which has its affiliate, Iowa Council of the Blind, here in Iowa.

Hicklin: Do you guys still have regular meetings?

Dunlavy: They have a…The state organization has an annual convention in the spring.

Hicklin: Is that called the Iowa United Blind now?

Dunlavy: Iowa Council of the United Blind.

Hicklin: Okay. The consumers have been so important over the years, helping shape the laws, and keeping services, well, getting services improved and keeping them. And, we certainly appreciate the work that all the groups have done to…Iowa has some pretty unique programs. And, it's you guys as consumers that have made that happen. So, I know for my part it has been really fun and interesting to be a part of the Department for several decades.

Dunlavy: What area did you work in?

Hicklin: I came there as an industrial arts teacher, and that's what my degree from UNI was in. And anyway, eventually, became a Rehabilitation Counselor, and worked at that for a number of years, and decided finally that I'd like to get off the road, as there was an awful lot of travel. And, I had a chance to become the building manager, and so I was in charge of the building for, I don't know, 25 years or something like that. So, it's just been really a good place to work over the years.

Dunlavy: Oh, I see.

Hicklin: Anyway, you guys, as consumers that have talked to legislators and helped get laws passed, that sort of thing, has helped make Iowa as good as it is. So, we appreciate that.

Do you have any memorable job experiences? We were talking about that earlier. Anything that comes to mind?

Dunlavy: The kind of work that I did wasn't exciting work or anything like that, but it was work that needed to be done. And you could, after your hands learned how to do it, why your mind could do all other kinds of things; and while your hands were working. And, I made a lot of friends, and I think I showed a few people that blindness was not the end of the world, at least I hope I did.

Hicklin: I'm sure you did. There's still a lot of educating that needs to be done.

Dunlavy: Well, the problem is they expect all of us to be alike, and we're not. We're as different as they are.

Hicklin: Sure.

Dunlavy: And what I can do, someone else can't do, and what they can do beautifully, I can make a mess of real easy. No, were all different. And there's no reason to expect blind people to be alike, and be able to do all of the things that everyone, that each person can do everything; that just isn't practical. It doesn't even make sense. It isn't true of sighted people, so why should it be true of blind people? We come in as many different varieties as sighted people do.

Hicklin: Certainly.

Dunlavy: And, they certainly don't all come alike by any means.

Hicklin: Does anything else come to mind that you'd like to mention?

Dunlavy: Not particularly.

Hicklin: Dawn had talked to you about this some months ago. Have you had a chance to be part of the groups that she works with?

Dunlavy: Oh, I know.

Hicklin: The advisory boards or meetings?

Dunlavy: Her support group?

Hicklin: Yes.

Dunlavy: I attend occasionally. I haven't been a constant member or attendee. Too many of the times on the day that the meeting is, is the day that my reader is available, and when my reader is available to come and help me, everybody else gets put back.

Hicklin: Sure.

Dunlavy: But I do attend when I can, and I'm really the only one in the group that has been blind for any; for a lifetime, practically. And, I don't know, I…Things that seem so difficult for them are so automatic for me, that sometimes it's kind of hard to explain to them just how it comes.

Hicklin: It's kind of like your hands on the assembly line. You're able to do things without really even thinking about them.

Dunlavy: Right. I've always done them that way. I've always done it that way. It isn't something I learned in the last two years.

Hicklin: Do you have any hobbies that you particularly enjoy?

Dunlavy: Oh, I enjoy reading, as you may have suspected, and I do some crocheting, some knitting. And those are the main things.

Hicklin: I see several examples setting in the room here of your crocheting and needle point, or whatever it's called. You've done some really nice things.

Dunlavy: Well, most of the crocheting here in this room are things that have been given to me by friends, and the needle point is some my sister has done. And whatever you call that, I'm not sure what you call it, my sister did that, too. I've done a little bit of this kind of stuff on canvas, but not very much.

Hicklin: It's kind of like weaving with yarn or something and cutting it off?

Dunlavy: Well, you use little pieces of yarn.

30:00

Dunlavy: And, you have a background piece of sort, of plastic with little holes in it, and you pull the yarn up through the holes and loop it over.

Hicklin: Sure. I've seen that. I don't know what you call it.

Dunlavy: I don't know what it's called either, but you can make different designs with it by using different colors.

Hicklin: Do you enjoy traveling or anything, or what do you do for fun?

Dunlavy: I used to like to travel some. I never was a great traveler. When I was working, you didn't have time for it, but. And then the last few years, I'm just not up to it physically anymore. The years take their toll.

Hicklin: Yes, I'm learning that, too, and I have a few years to go yet.

Dunlavy: I hope to have a few more years, but I don't do much traveling anymore. There for a few years I had a cousin that she and I made a lot of trips together, but then she has passed away since, so that took care of that. And,

about that time, I was less able to travel too, so it was just; it worked out.

Hicklin: Well, with your volunteering and with your reading, and your other work, you've found certainly good ways to stay busy; as much as you want to be.

Dunlavy: I'm satisfied with my life. It's not what a lot of people would like, but it suits me, and that's all that's important.

Hicklin: Well, like you say, we're all different.

Dunlavy: We certainly are. And, I think that's about it.

Hicklin: Okay. Just kind of looking back over my notes, is there any other memories of the school for the blind; memorable events that happened there that might be of interest to folks or anything like that? It seems like the school played just an incredibly important part in the lives of people over the years.

Dunlavy: Oh, it was. It kind of hurt some of us when the school began to diminish so, in later years. There were a lot of us, and there were 200 or so students there in the few years that I was there. And, it was…And we came from all over the state, and you made friends from everywhere.

Hicklin: Yes.

Dunlavy: Our entire education came through the school, and we had not only the regular curriculum of reading and

English, history, geography, mathematics, and all those kind of things, but we had access to music, like I said. I took some music, and even though I never amounted to very much as a musician, I learned things. And I did enjoy doing what I did. And, there was some drama, and I participated in a couple of plays that was put on. And, there was a choir that was; I didn't participate in that, because, well, it just wasn't my cup of tea. But, the choir was quite well known in the area. And, we did have an orchestra at that time, and I was a part of that. I played second violin. And, we took first place in the State music contest a few times during my time there at school. The school was a nice place. It had…We were well looked after. I think we were…The teaching that we had, I think, was as good or, maybe, even better than what my brother and sisters had here in the public schools. I know I had access to more extra curricular than they did, because of…We lived out at the edge of town, and they didn't have the transportation back and forth, and that limited what they did after school.

Hicklin: Right.

Dunlavy: Where I didn't have that problem.

Hicklin: Well, it sounds like there was a tremendous sense of community there.

Dunlavy: There was. And we knew a lot of the kids, some older and some younger.

Hicklin: You made a lot of life-long friends?

Dunlavy: Oh yes. I have friends today that I keep in touch with that I've known since I started, and unfortunately over the past few years, I'm losing some of them, too.

Hicklin: Yes, that comes with age.

Dunlavy: Yes, it does.

Hicklin: It's a sad thing, but I guess it's part of life. One thing that I hear some younger folks saying, is that one of the disadvantages with the current education system here, blind kids educated in the public schools; is that you don't have a lot of access to other blind youth or adults, whatever, and you don't have, necessarily, the same kind of close relationships.

Dunlavy: No, no you wouldn't. Some of the things I've heard I'm not…I think there are some children that are in public school that are getting a good education. They're the bright ones, the outgoing ones. I think they probably blend well, and if they have enough support at home, and so forth, I think they're probably doing well. But, I think there's probably a group of them, who for one reason or another, school just isn't their cup of tea, too much, and maybe not much support from home, and I'm wondering how much they actually get out of school. And the theory seems to be now, from what I understand, is you don't fail a child, you pass them on regardless whether they've learned it or not. And, I can't see how that helps the child in the next grade to build on what they didn't learn.

Hicklin: Right, that just leads to failure in some things.

Dunlavy: It just leads to total failure in the end, but, and I have a suspicion there are a good many who, that that happens to. Of course, there at the school for the blind we had some who didn't learn well. Some were very slow learners, but they did get some. And, our classes were small enough that the teachers could work with them. It's one thing to have 6, 8 or 10 in a class, and it's another thing to have 20, 25 or so in a class.

Hicklin: Certainly.

Dunlavy: And, from what I'm hearing today, there's enough going on in the classes that, where a few can be disruptive enough that it messes everything up for everybody else. I don't know that that's a fact, but I've been told that it is. So, I'm not real sure that total mainstreaming was the wisest thing that the Iowa Legislature ever did. I think the school for the blind or the Braille and sight saving school, or whatever you want to call it, had, and still could have, a very important place in the education of blind children. So, I'll step down off of my soapbox.

Hicklin: Do you remember there were summer programs, a summer program that would be provided at the school that apparently taught things like some job-related skills; like, chair caning or rug weaving, or rug making of some sort? Did you ever take part in any of that, or know?

Dunlavy: That was part of our curriculum. I took weaving. I liked it very much. I took a little chair caning. I don't remember today how I did it, but I did take some, and…

Hicklin: Was that offered through the school year, then?

Dunlavy: Oh yes, it was part of our regular curriculum. We had quite a department. There were three teachers that taught those kinds of things, when I was there. Two of them worked on; one worked on rug weaving only, another one did some of the rug weaving and basket making, and another teacher worked with chair caning, and mat making, and broom making, and those kind of things. No, there were three teachers that did that, and there was another teacher that taught piano tuning all the time.

Hicklin: For many years the Department had a Home Industries Program that I know, when I was first a staff member, there were products made by the blind of Iowa that were sold through various, like, women's clubs. And a lot of that, I think, was sewing.

Dunlavy: Yeah, I think it was. I was never involved in that, but I did know about it, and I did have one friend that did some of that.

Hicklin: I wondered if that was kind of something related to that training that would have been at the school for the blind?

Dunlavy: We had regular sewing classes, and Home Ec. Classes; same as they do in public schools.

Hicklin: Right.

Dunlavy: I had two years of cooking, domestic science, home economics, whatever you want to call it, and I don't know how many years I took sewing. I enjoyed sewing. I've done a lot of that over the years. I don't do much of that anymore, but I used to do a lot of it.

Hicklin: It's a good skill to have with the cost of clothing these days.

Dunlavy: It certainly is.

Hicklin: Or just to be able to mend is pretty nice.

Dunlavy: In the later years, all I do is just mend. But I used to make a lot of my clothes.

Hicklin: Well, is there anything else that comes to mind?

Dunlavy: Not just offhand.

Hicklin: Well, I certainly appreciate your time and granting us permission to record this. And this is hopefully something that folks will listen to in years to come or read, and get a better understanding of the life and times of folks in prior generations.

Dunlavy: Well, things have changed tremendously just during my lifetime.

Hicklin: There's a lot of things that are a whole lot easier now, but there's still tremendous discrimination for jobs and that sort of thing. But it's different times.

Dunlavy: Well, there probably always will be.

Hicklin: People like yourself that have been out and worked, like you mentioned 38 years for the macaroni company. That certainly sets a good example of saying that blind people are just real, normal people.

Dunlavy: Yeah.

Hicklin: Which is a lot of the message.

Dunlavy: I think we are.

Hicklin: Yes.

Dunlavy: That's about that, I think.

Hicklin: Well, thank you very much, Lucille.

Dunlavy: You're welcome.

46:17
(End of Interview)

Jo Ann Slayton
9-2-2011